



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Reviewing Stand

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Illinois U Library What Can Talk Settle?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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What Can Talk Settle?

MR. MCBURNEY: Gentlemen, I think it is most appropriate that we raise the question: "What can talk settle?" here on this Reviewing Stand. We have been conducting weekly discussions for some eighteen years, and we frequently meet the criticism: What do you ever settle? One letter puts it this way: "You talk, talk, talk and talk some more; blah, blah, blah, but you never settle anything and nothing ever happens." How would you answer that kind of criticism, Krueger?

MR. KRUEGER: I would say, McBurney, that if talk were all blah, it isn't going to settle anything, but talk doesn't have to be blah, and an awful lot of talk is not blah, and that by and large the world is suffering more from lack of talk than it is from too much talk.

MR. MCBURNEY: Thelen, what would you say on that criticism?

'One Conclusion'

MR. THELEN: I would say the man shows the criticism is unjust because he has already reached one conclusion from the talk, namely, talk is all blah, blah, blah. The question I would have is whether there are other conclusions in addition to that one being reached.

MR. LEE: Sometimes the general feeling that talk doesn't get anywhere comes because the man who listens starts out by expecting simple answers, and easy solutions to great big problems, and when after twenty or thirty minutes of talk you don't have one of these nice package solutions, he has the feeling that the talk didn't settle anything.

MR. MCBURNEY: Of course, there are a number of things we do know about the outcomes of discussion. How applicable they are to the kind of program we conduct here every week is an open question, but we do know that the attitudes of people who participate in discussion change significantly, and we do know secondly,

that the dispersion of attitudes is significantly reduced as a result of discussion. In other words, we know that people get closer together. And we know thirdly, that they reach a consensus or approach a consensus at least on attitudes significantly superior to those held at the outset of the discussion, if you can judge by the opinion of experts. I object very strongly to the notion that talk in the form of discussion is futile. Things do happen.

MR. KREUGER: I would say, McBurney, as a dean of a school of speech, you probably have to say something like that. On the other hand, I think it's also true that the whole educational process — not quite the whole of it, but most of the educational process — is conducted on the assumption that communication, verbal and written communication between people, can result in their arriving at some joint conclusions as to what it's proper to think and what it's proper to do.

Factor of Participation

MR. THELEN: I think a special problem for programs of this sort is that the people who write the letters are eavesdropping on a conversation rather than taking part in it, and I think this factor of participation and the quality of it makes it different.

MR. MCBURNEY: As a matter of fact, the conclusions I reported apply to a situation in which there is, I take it, a little more participation than listeners to a program of this sort would engage in.

MR. LEE: I shouldn't want to take our correspondent's point of view as a means by which we generalize about all kinds of talking because it seems to me that away from the radio studio and the microphone there are all sorts of occasions when the opportunity to talk with other people provides a protection against making a fool of yourself. That is, a supervisor,

a boss, an administrator, who has a plan or a program or who thinks he has a way of functioning, will discover one of the most useful ways he can protect himself against acting foolishly is to find a group of people who will listen to him, who will check on the very conclusions and points he makes.

MR. KRUEGER: You mean then in the talk process, the talker at any given time is actually getting a service performed for him by the people who consent to talk with him.

MR. LEE: Krueger, you phrase what I think is one of the ultimate justifications or one of the ultimate reasons why a man ought to look for such opportunities. Namely, here is a way to see whether or not the wisdom he has arrived at joins with or goes along with the collective wisdom.

MR. McBURNEY: Of course, when you ask the question: "What can talk settle?" you really have a somewhat ambiguous term in that word "settle." What do you mean by settle? How do you have to settle things by talk in order to make talk useful, Lee?

Talking and Acting

MR. LEE: You, I take it, are raising a kind of distinction between talking and acting: that is, as if talk merely leads to more talk and then you stop and engage in some sort of function. I am not sure that putting the problem in those terms clarifies it. Thelen, you ought to give us your view about that distinction. Do you see it that way? Let me open it by saying for myself, I don't see it that way. I know of no social action which doesn't require talk in the very process of working something out.

MR. THELEN: I think you are putting talk in the context of a total experience in which talking is only one kind of action that goes on, that basically our problems are always ones of communicating experience and talk plays a part in doing this. I think the important thing that talk does more explicitly than any other form of action is to allow people to know they are at the same place or have the same feelings or start from

the same points of view so that they can then coordinate their activities.

MR. KRUEGER: When you say, Thelen, talk is one of the means people have of communicating with each other, wouldn't you be willing to go a little further than that and say that talk is one of the most important ways of communicating?

MR. THELEN: Surely, because of its greater specificity. That, any classroom teacher knows. There are a lot of other means, too, such as showing a person how to do it himself, sometimes without saying a word about it. A very effective science teaching method, for example, involves carrying through a demonstration completely silently and then discussing with the class what were the points one was trying to demonstrate, but the talk does help as a guide to reflection and drawing conclusions.

Reach An Agreement?

MR. McBURNEY: Let me ask, if I may, a number of somewhat more specific questions in this area. I am trying to find out how you have to settle things in order to make talk significant. Do you have to reach an agreement in order to have a significant outcome?

MR. LEE: Sometimes I should suppose if you didn't have an agreement as a result of thirty minutes of talk, that would be useful. It's so easy to approach a problem with the feeling that the little answer I come up with is enough, and it may be that the most educational, the most therapeutic thing that could happen to a participant, is to realize that maybe we have to disagree at present in terms of the way we have experienced or defined the problems we have to face.

MR. KRUEGER: But it is quite possible for people to disagree about what ought to be done. They may continue to disagree about what ought to be done, but nevertheless, agree that having gone through this process of deciding what ought to be done, they will go ahead and do this until they change their minds about it. So if the action to be taken is regarded as of a temporary character, if it is

not a death sentence that is being passed, then it becomes quite possible for people as a result of talk to clarify their differences and yet to have sufficiently substantial unity of action for all the practical purposes that men face.

MR. THELEN: I agree with you on that. I think that one of the problems of talk is that there are certain kinds of talk we don't have that we should have. For example, a group can agree that it has no confidence in any ideas so far suggested instead of simply fighting over the alternatives that have been suggested until somebody gives way, but once a group knows it has no particular confidence in the alternatives suggested, then it can begin to raise the question of why it doesn't have confidence? What could they do to get more confidence in these actions or some other action?

Mutual Understanding

MR. McBURNEY: I should like to suggest in answer to my own question that there are many areas in which talk can be conducted without reaching any agreement, and conducted most profitably. If you reach an agreement to disagree, you have a significant agreement, if that agreement is reached in mutual understanding. I think *understanding* is one of the more important outcomes of talk, and I would hope that such understanding or contribution to such understanding would be one of the more important outcomes of discussions of the kind we are having here today.

MR. LEE: Think of a business situation in which you have a series of supervisors or foremen or office managers. His mere adherence to the usefulness of discussion will move him to bring people together to tell them all sorts of things that without the discussion he and they may never hear about or learn about. In other words, the mere recognition that all talk isn't designed to settle something is important. It is often designed to let you know what I am doing, let you know what I am thinking.

MR. KRUEGER: I would wager, Lee,

if it were permitted, that when anybody raises the question: "What can talk settle?" he is thinking primarily about problem solving. That is, he is thinking primarily of situations in which there is a problem to which a solution is sought and it is expected that out of the talk process will come some sort of solution to the problem. Now, the solution to the problem may be to decide that the problem isn't what they thought it was. The solution may be to decide that there really isn't any problem by the time they get through talking. The therapeutic value of the talk itself may have caused the problem to disappear, but there are a great many tough problems that don't disappear simply because people talk about them; and where it's reasonable to expect that out of the talk process, there will come an action solution to a problem.

'More Important Agreement'

MR. THELEN: I am particularly impressed by that point, Krueger, the notion that while a group doesn't seem to agree on the things that it was trying to agree on, it is actually reaching agreement on other things that are much more important to it. I would like to throw in a little example here that I happened to bring along with me for this occasion. Consider a couple of club women, for example, on a nominating committee, and somebody suggests, "Well, how about Mrs. Smith? She would make a fine president." So the dowager in the group says, "Such a lovely person, so completely devoted to her family." And somebody else says, "Yes, and so sweet; why, she is on good terms with all the right people." Now, it looks as though they have reached an agreement that this is a fine person, but actually, I would submit, what they have reached an agreement on is that she is not going to be the next president.

MR. McBURNEY: Gentlemen, however futile or efficacious talk is in resolving human problems, what are the alternatives to it?

MR. KRUEGER: Let me take the first crack at that, McBurney, because I am not an expert in this field

at all. I am strictly a lay practitioner. It seems to me — what the experts here leave of me when they get through, I don't know — but it seems to me that in the broad civilizing process that has gone on among men for a long period of time, the heart of the business is that men learn to settle their problems by discussion rather than by what seems to me to be the major alternative to settling problems by discussion, that is, trying to settle them by clouting each other over the head. The civilizing process consists to a very considerable extent in developing our ability to settle problems by talk rather than by sticking bayonets in people's backs.

MR. McBURNEY: I personally agree with that. I think that's the ultimate alternative.

MR. LEE: I don't find any point or anything in what you said, Krueger, that would lead any expert to take issue, whether at this table or any other. Quite apart from its civilizing influence, I again go back to that notion that there is in many minds perhaps more wisdom than in any one mind, and if you don't have talk, then you have solutions imposed by individuals. You have one man in the family. You have one man in the state, and you have one man on the team; and if you don't have talk, one of the alternatives to me is action by individuals without concern for the people at the receiving end of the action.

'Government By Talk'

MR. KRUEGER: In this sense then, Lee, political democracy consists essentially of government by talk, whereas, a totalitarian setup minimizes the role of discussion in the government process.

MR. THELEN: I would have a small difference on that, that it isn't so much government by talk, but government in terms of the data that are necessary to reach good decisions. Some of these data have to be gotten by talk, but I think there are other ways to get data, too, in the surveys of various kinds. Even examination of objective facts like how many

people go to what kinds of movies is also involved.

MR. LEE: In a dictatorship or in any fascist or other monolithic society there is talk, but it's only one way. I suppose the peculiar character of talk in a democratic community is that it is two-way, that even if an individual makes a decision, someone, unless we feel that talk is useless, has the opportunity to raise a question, and when you raise a question, then you introduce talk and you make settlements broader. You make them responsible in terms of many people.

MR. McBURNEY: All of this leads me to ask: What are the conditions and requisites for significant talk? In other words, Lee, how should we talk with people in order to get something accomplished?

MR. LEE: Well, I suppose the quickest beginning point at that question is to say we have to learn to talk together. We all learn to verbalize. We all learn to wave our lower jaws, but, it seems to me, there is a very special kind of skill which requires certain kinds of attitudes to learn to talk with people productively.

Talk and Discussion

MR. KRUEGER: Learning to discuss then, you say, is something more than simply learning to talk.

MR. LEE: That's right. The child can do it one way. Now, it is only as we grow up and learn a different set of skills that we get this thing which is talking between and with people.

MR. McBURNEY: Do you agree with that, Thelen?

MR. THELEN: Yes, I think we are seeing the beginning of the development of the technology of social problem solving in which talk will be the basic instrument of communication. This technology is going to have included in it such skills as the skills of knowing what kind of data a group needs to reach a decision at any given time, the skills of knowing what the group is talking about, what it says it's talking about, instead of something else, the skills of knowing how

to break down a problem so that the first action step you take can test what the next step ought to be, and that kind of thing. I think healthy progress is being made, but we have a long way to go.

MR. LEE: And I should also add that there are all sorts of other skills we need. Think, for example, of learning how to listen. Any kind of survey you make of any controversy between small groups of people reveals — or at least, those we have made reveal — that people make a stab at listening. That is, we hear with one ear, but we aren't giving the man full, undivided, receptive attention. It takes some skill and it takes learning to understand not merely to hear the words a man says, but to listen with a view to understanding what he is trying to say.

MR. McBURNEY: Now, you have given one requisite of significant talk which might be summed up as a more or less conscious methodology in which you have had some experience. Are there any other requisites of good talk?

Honesty

MR. KRUEGER: I think there are, McBurney. At least, there is one that I think I can mention. Apart from these skills, that Lee and Thelen have mentioned and knowing the methodology of productive discussion, it seems to me there is something a bit less tangible than that. I don't know that there are any formal ways of teaching it to people, but I don't see any reason for expecting that talk would develop into discussion of the problem solving sort unless you are able to assume a simple elementary kind of honesty on the part of people who are engaging in the discussion. That is, if somebody talks with somebody else, and there is no relationship between what he says and what he really thinks, then I see no reason for that kind of talk to arrive at — any kind of talk to arrive at — any kind of productive decision. Therefore, it seems to me that simple, ordinary bourgeois honesty of the sort which I think the totalitarian systematically repudiates,

both the fascists and Communists, is a prerequisite for expecting talk of the two-way variety to result in any kind of satisfactory settlement of any problem.

MR. THELEN: I think the problem of honesty, however, has to be hit at two levels. There is the level of deliberately saying something other than what you mean — this is that elementary kind of thing. But many times one is in a situation where he says something which at that moment he believes and means, but shortly after he realizes he didn't mean that at all. There are all kinds of conditions in groups that lead to this kind of thing happening.

MR. LEE: And another one of these conditions for good talk which is not a denial of this one, but perhaps a different one, is that we need to learn a kind of patience, a kind of capacity to sit with a tough problem.

MR. McBURNEY: With the world burning up around you, you want patience?

MR. LEE: Yes, I do. With the world burning up, we need the best kind of reflection and the best kind of looking at the problem because the thing that worries me most when people talk together is the kind of impatient leader that says: Let's get done with the talk and do something.

MR. McBURNEY: This impatient leader may face deadlines of all sorts; that is, the work of the world has to get done, and you can't sit around and talk indefinitely. We get hungry. We meet all sorts of practical emergencies.

'Patient Cross-Talk'

MR. LEE: McBurney, I have at least one answer to that. It would be very useful if sometimes administrators foresaw the kinds of problems they have. I sometimes wonder whether one of the most useful tactics of the administrator is to indicate that a deadline exists as a way of preventing the kind of patient cross-talk that I want more of.

MR. THELEN: Right. The amount of energy that gets spent in trying to get out of a mess that could have

been prevented with much less energy earlier is phenomenal.

MR. LEE: That's my point.

MR. KRUEGER: I could give you an illustration, however, that doesn't quite check with your description. Last year when the Administration in Washington sent over to Capitol Hill way in advance of the end of the fiscal year a string of budgetary messages, Congress got to work on the appropriation bills, and on some of the major ones, it was more than four months after the expiration of the fiscal year; that is, four months of the next fiscal year had already passed, before Congress had got through with its discussion, so-called, of the appropriation bills. Now, that wasn't a problem of the administrator. There was a problem of the policy-making branch of a government getting itself organized in such a way that it could get its talking done in time.

'Plan the Talk'

MR. LEE: And it becomes a technique or a problem of planning the talk rather than of putting the onus on the difficulty of getting a decision. In other words, if we are dealing with a tremendous problem, and budgetary ones are tremendous, I take it, then it may be that we have to take a brand new attitude towards talk and say if it takes three times as long, let us set up the machinery so that we have three times as much time. I suspect that much of that discussion that went on so long was not discussion over the dollars and cents, but discussion of the policy that should have been made long before anybody talked about spending the dollars and cents.

MR. KRUEGER: That's undoubtedly true. That's why I called it "so-called" discussion.

MR. LEE: I should like to offer as a kind of generalization, maybe, that talk which ends in a hurry, with quick, packaged conclusions, may in the long run create as many problems as it is supposed to solve.

MR. MCBURNEY: I would like to ask another question in this area.

How expert does a man have to be to engage in significant talk, Lee? How much do you have to know?

MR. LEE: I met some people recently who were a little afraid to talk about the steel crisis and the Korean problem and so on because they said that the only people who really can talk about these are the people who are responsible for making decisions. I would like to tell those people that you ought to engage in talk, and you ought to engage in talk at the level at which you are able to engage in the discussion, but you mustn't pretend or presume to come to conclusions that go beyond your experience or knowledge and ability with respect to the problem. The talk may be at a low level in terms of solutions, but it seems to me there are still values in getting people to do the talking.

MR. MCBURNEY: Of course, if you are dealing with a problem which requires a solution at a fairly high intellectual level and the people engaging in the talk are essentially uninformed, how patient does one have to be?

'Review the Answer'

MR. KRUEGER: May I make a suggestion on that, McBurney. My opinion is that most of the questions of policy that come out, on which people feel an answer has to be given right away, we are in a hurry to get an answer. There is nothing substantially wrong with the administrator going ahead and giving an answer to the question — the president of the steel corporation, the President of the United States — provided the answer given by the experts to the question is then subject to review. Now, if an election comes up again in four years, if there is an opportunity to make what they call a post-audit and decide whether they want more of the same kind of action or less of it, then I see no objection to not having quite so much of a pre-audit of their actions. In other words, if the action that is taken is regarded as a continuing part of the discussion process and is subject to criticism, I think the overwhelming bulk of the population is possessed of the capacities for making the simple kind of judgment as to

whether they want more or less of the sort of thing that has been going on.

MR. McBURNEY: We have been in the process here of spelling out some of the requisites and conditions of good talk. I am sure none of you men would wish to take this as a definitive list, but perhaps it will be helpful. I should like to introduce some applications if I may. How about political talk? We are in for a lot of it in the next few months, Krueger. Do you think it will do any good? Will it change any votes? Will it bring any enlightenment?

MR. KRUEGER: Since I think that the basic questions that are shaking the world apart . . .

MR. McBURNEY: Of course, you have done a lot of that talking yourself.

MR. KRUEGER: I have done my share. Since I think that those basic questions that are shaking the world apart like economic stability and the war and peace questions are questions that have to be solved through the political process, my only hope for getting them solved is through political talk. However, I think there is a big distinction between the kind of political talk that goes on in the heat of an electoral battle which is an in-fighting sort of job, the sort you are going to see during the next several months, and the kind of political talk that goes on during, say, the three and a half years that are not years of campaigning. I see far more that is productive in the political discussions between campaigns than I do in the political discussions during campaigns.

Political Talk

MR. THELEN: But those political campaigns serve a very useful purpose, don't they, in getting people wrought-up and involved and in becoming sensitive to issues that during the three and a half years when there is no particular pressure one is not sensitive to, nor even aware of. So I would set the hot political campaign as a shot in the arm to being a citizen at the national level, and becoming identified with large questions. We probably all need this.

MR. McBURNEY: Some people suggested, you know, that President Truman talked himself through the last election and that Mr. Dewey withdrew from talk at his own peril. Is there anything in that analysis, Krueger?

'Really a Candidate'

MR. KRUEGER: I think there may be in the sense that he showed that he was a vigorous fighter by his talk. The number of whistle stops and the vigor of the adjectives used, showed a lot of people that Mr. Truman was really a candidate which some of them might not otherwise have thought. It also probably meant that some people who were inclined to vote for him, but might have stayed home, instead, actually turned out and got their vote cast.

MR. LEE: There was a brief indication a minute or two ago that maybe talk doesn't change votes. Well, it may be that a Republican campaigning may not bring many Democrats across the line, but campaigning does tend to keep the boys who are already sold in line. That is, if you eliminated talk by any standard bearer, there would be great danger that you would lose the people already committed to any political party.

MR. McBURNEY: May I ask another question? Do you think the steel crisis is an evidence of a breakdown in talk, Krueger?

MR. KRUEGER: I would say, McBurney, that it's an evidence that there hasn't been enough talk going on on the question. This country has got a basic question of what its policy ought to be with regard to the continuity of operations in industry that it cannot afford to have stopped. I haven't heard much sensible talk about that. For my money, I would look forward to a period of eight or ten years of serious discussion of this question with the President acting on it, with Congress acting on it, with the Supreme Court acting on it, all their decisions being taken as temporary, and if after ten years of public discussion of that question we could arrive at something like a

policy for this country, I would consider that success.

'Premium on Patience'

MR. McBURNEY: You are really placing a premium on patience, I would say. Of course, I could ask, too, about the Korean situation. Is that an evidence of a breakdown of talk? What do you think of that?

MR. LEE: No, McBurney, it seems to me it has taken a long time, and the issues are complicated and involved, and it may be that what we have in Korea is a slightly different version of the discussion process. It seems to

me you have to make a distinction between a situation in which people meet with a view to getting an answer and the kind of power political situation that we have in Korea in which each of the participants has already decided what is the answer. But even in that kind of stalemate situation, I still wouldn't give up on talk because the very process tells the participants how far the other man is likely to go. I still wouldn't give up. Indeed, I would counsel patience on Korea even though every impulse is to cut it off and do something else. . . .

ANNOUNCER: I am sorry to interrupt, but our time is up.

Suggested Reading

Compiled by William Huff,
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,
Deering Library, Northwestern University.



EWBANK, HENRY L. and AUER, J. J. *Discussion and Debate; Tools of a Democracy*. F. S. Crofts & Co., N.Y., 1941.

A textbook surveying the field of discussion and debate and considering the mental activity employed, the various kinds of discussion used, methods of employing these types and the purposes of discussion.

FANSLER, THOMAS. *Teaching Adults by Discussion*. University of N.Y., N.Y., 1938.

A short survey of group discussion, its purpose, general methods of discussion, and rules which make this form of "talk" effective.

FANSLER, THOMAS. *Creative Power Through Discussion*. Harper, N.Y., 1950.

"Handbook on how to participate in any kind of discussion group in professional, trade, civic, social, or religious gatherings."

LASKER, BRUNO. *Democracy Through Discussion*. H. W. WILSON, N.Y., 1950.

"Organization and operation of groups formed to discuss the trends of American life."

LEE, IRVING J. *How to Talk with People; a Program for Preventing Troubles that Come When People Talk Together*. Harper, N.Y., 1952.

An informal analysis of difficulties encountered and misunderstandings which arise in group discussions and committee meetings, with suggestions for overcoming these communication problems.

McBURNEY, JAMES H. and HANCE, KENNETH G. *Discussion in Human Affairs*. Harper & Bros., N.Y., 1950.

A textbook written with two purposes in view: "(1) to explain discussion as a means to better *understanding* of human affairs; and (2) to develop *attitudes* and *skills* which enable people to participate in discussion competently."

National Institute of Social Relations, Inc. *It Pays to Talk It Over*. The Institute, Washington, D.C., 1947.

A handbook composed of materials by several discussion leaders for the purpose of answering the "why, who, what, and how" of discussion.

WAGNER, RUSSELL H. and ARNOLD, CARROLL C. *Handbook of Group Discussion*. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1950.

A handbook on the art of discussion, presenting general principles and procedures along with examples of group discussion.

Saturday Review of Literature 33:9-10, Mr. 11, '50. "Raw Materials of Persuasion." L. J. HALLE, JR.

Words must work in conjunction with attitudes and quite often the attitude in which the words are used is the determining factor as to whether "talk" is effective.

School Executive 69:51-3, Ag., '50. "Discussion: Let's Have More of It." O. THOMAS.

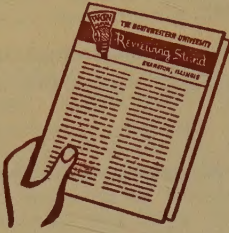
Discussion groups in junior high schools are educative forces shaping democratic thinking and developing respect for other people's opinions.

Vital Speeches 17:62-3, Nov. 1, '50. "Debate, Discussion and Decision-Making." A. EISENSTADT.

Speech activities and the verbal expression of ideas are privileges we enjoy but do not always appreciate, because we fail to realize that "group talk and collective decision make up the bedrock of the American way of life."

Wilson Library Bulletin 26:322-5, Dec., '51. "Invitation to Ideas; Library Experiment in Discussion." T. BARENSFIELD.

Library discussion programs play an important part in the presentation of new ideas, new writings and noted personalities.



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